# All stops, Paris to London

It's a rare French organ – so what is it doing in the chapel of a London Catholic school? **Clare Stevens** uncovers the tale of how a formidable nun thwarted the authorities

SACRED HEART HIGH SCHOOL

**IF YOU'RE STUCK** on the upper deck of a bus at the eastbound traffic lights on the busy Hammersmith Road in west London, and you glance over the wall on your left, you may catch a glimpse of the peaceful cloister gardens of Sacred Heart High School. End-on to the road, with a large, stone-traceried window, is the school's Grade II*-listed chapel, designed by J.F. Bentley, who was also responsible for the design of Westminster Cathedral.

Over the past few years, a programme of enhancement of the school's premises and treasured artefacts has included landscaping of the gardens and the restoration of an outdoor crucifix donated by old girls a century ago, as well a statue of Jesus at the centre of the cloister garden which came from the Society of the Sacred Heart's convent in Lille, France.

Another project is the restoration of the remarkable sequence of murals depicting the life of Jesus that span the walls of the indoor cloister walk. Attributed to Mother Mary Maycock, a sister of the society, they were painted between 1902 and 1907. Some were copied from fifteenth-century paintings by Fra Angelico, whose work Mother Mary had seen on a study trip to Rome.

Bentley's chapel, meanwhile, is due to have its ineffectual mixture of fluorescent strips and theatre spotlights replaced by elegant pendant lights, similar in design to those in the cathedral. And focusing on the chapel prompted the school's development and leadership team to think about the pipe organ, sitting neglected on a gallery at the opposite end of the worship space to the altar; lack of maintenance had rendered it unplayable for almost 20 years. Could it too be restored and brought back into life?

Alex Dijkhuis, Sacred Heart's director of communications and development, invited organ adviser Dr William McVicker to take a look. The organ was believed to be original to the chapel, and McVicker was expecting to find an instrument by the English builder T.C. Lewis, whose workshop was in Brixton, south London, and who was a frequent collaborator with Bentley. But when he raised the wooden music desk to reveal the two-manual console, he was surprised to see that the stop knobs were labelled in French.

What is more, one of the stops was named *Flûte Pyramidale*. "I have only seen one other example of this stop name – at the Eglise Notre-Dame du Finistère in Brussels," McVicker tells me. "Furthermore, the design of other pipework in the Hammersmith is similar to that in N-D du Finistère, which is the work of a Flemish organ builder called Hippolyte Loret."

**BEHIND A BEAUTIFUL** oak case carved with two sacred heart symbols, the organ is full of dust. Some of its pipes have collapsed and the electronic blower has been disconnected for safety reasons, so it can only be played using the original hand pump to get air into the wind chest – a task Dijkhuis willingly undertakes for visitors. Yet even in this poor condition its distinctive, warm, continental sound is apparent – McVicker describes it as "intoxicating" – and the axial projection, which is also a continental feature, means that it seems surprisingly loud from the chapel floor.

Rescue act – the rare pipe organ, above; and the intrepid Mother Mabel Digby, below right

The next person to be consulted about the organ's provenance was Paris-based organist and musicologist Éric Humbertclaude. In the Bibliothèque Nationale, he unearthed a description of an organ which matches the Hammersmith instrument. It had been commissioned by the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the Chapelle des Saints Anges, the smaller of two chapels attached to its headquarters in Boulevard des Invalides, Paris. Even better, Humbertclaude discovered a letter from Hippolyte Loret to the society, explaining that the high cost of the organ for the school chapel was due to "special features" he had included in its construction.

But how could this instrument have found its way to Hammersmith? The answer lies in the bitter hostility of the French government to religion, particularly religious education, in the early years of the twentieth century. The axe fell hard upon the Society of the Sacred Heart, which was ordered to close 48 convents, including its Paris headquarters. The head of the society at the time was its first English superior general, Mother Mabel Digby (1835–1911). She responded with extraordinary speed to the crisis, not only managing the relocation of 2,500 society members expelled from French convents, but

SOCIETY OF SACRED HEART

ensuring that as many as possible of their treasures left too – including the organs.

For Digby, the loss of the mother house in Paris was especially painful, because it was the place where, as a young Anglican convert, she had spent many summer holidays as the guest of the society's founder, Madeleine Sophie Barat (1779–1865). When the authorities demanded access to the site and an inventory of its fixtures and fittings, Mother Digby binned their letters. On 7 August 1907 she received a final notification that anyone still in residence in four days' time would be forcibly expelled. On their final day, according to her biographer Anne Pollen, she revealed a statement painted on the wall of the Mother House:

*"The Superior General of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, expelled by force from the houses of which she is the legitimate proprietor, and despoiled of the goods which belong to the Congregation, protests with all the power of her soul against this sacrilegious violation of her rights.*

*"She reminds whosoever it may be that shall take possession of this property, that, by the mere fact, he falls under the sentence of major excommunication which cuts him off from the body of the Church, and that absolution from this penalty can be granted to him only by the Pope, after restitution of the goods usurped, and reparation of the harm effected."*

Then she threw the keys to the building into the bushes, and left.

Before moving to Paris to lead the international congregation of the Sacred Heart, Mother Digby had been closely involved with its work fostering education, particularly for poor children, in England. In 1893 the society took over the Hammersmith school site, which had previously been a seminary for priests (though its long history includes a brief period as a Benedictine nunnery and it was founded as an IBVM Mary Ward convent by Frances Bedingfield, close friend of Queen Catherine of Braganza, in 1669).

So it was Digby who arranged for the Loret organ to be rescued from Paris and installed in the chapel in Hammersmith, where the school had recently been "upgraded" to a secondary, with a formal uniform, and a particular emphasis on offering a good education to bright children from families of limited means.

Today's head teacher, Sharon O'Donovan, says the organ is incredibly meaningful for the school. "It was commissioned for a new chapel built almost adjacent to the Mother House in Paris where our founder and superior general, Madeleine Sophie Barat, was living. It seems inconceivable that she was not involved some way in its purchase. We are all in awe of the steps taken by the sisters 43 years later, to have it dismantled and shipped to us in Hammersmith, to save it from being forcibly sold."

As for Sacred Heart's 1,000 pupils, they can look forward to one day hearing at chapel services, and perhaps even learning to play, a unique instrument with a fascinating history.

*Details of the restoration appeal for the Loret organ can be found on Sacred Heart High School's website at sacredheartconnect.com/pages/restoration-of-our-loret-organ. Alex Dijkhuis is giving a talk at the school on 12 February and 16 April in aid of the appeal, offering an opportunity to see the chapel and cloisters, normally closed to the public. Tickets are available on the events page of sacredheartconnect.com*